

Special Report

“Is Kim In?”

How Bad Behavior by USM Generates so Many Lawsuits

The recent USMNEWS.net report entitled [USM 'Sends a Terrible Message' to College Co-Eds](#) lays the groundwork for a multi-part series on the Davida Williams v. USM, Rex Stamper, et al. case that was brought to Forrest County Circuit Court back in 1996. Williams alleged in the suit that USM officials wrongly and malevolently prevented her from receiving her doctorate degree, and caused her serious mental and emotional anguish. Williams also alleged that USM English professor Rex Stamper sexually harassed and assaulted her. Williams was represented by attorney Kim Chaze, who sources say is a specialist in litigating against the Hattiesburg-based university.

This *Special Report* examines more of the 2005 court documents regarding the Williams’ lawsuit against USM et al. that began in 1996. The text below is from court records of events prompting the lawsuit:

For several years before the assault, [Davida] Williams had complained occasionally and generally about Stamper's inappropriate behavior to his immediate bosses, Dr. Thomas Richardson, Chair of the English Department from 1985-1988, and his successor, Dr. David Wheeler, Chair from 1988 forward. After the assault, however, she set up a special meeting with Dr. Glenn Harper, Dean of the Liberal Arts College, and English chair Wheeler to lodge her complaints. According to Williams's testimony, she told them in detail about what had happened in her home with Stamper and what she had endured for the past several years by him. Dean Harper, however, testified that she did not tell them about the alleged assault, but made general allegations of inappropriate behavior, and only wanted Stamper removed as chair of her doctoral committee. The result of the meeting, according to Williams, was that Harper and Wheeler agreed to remove Stamper from the dissertation committee, name [Harry] McCraw as chairman, order Stamper to stay away from Williams, and add Dr. William Lyddon from the Psychology Department to the committee. At trial, however, Stamper testified that he was not removed from the committee and was never told to stay away from Williams. Furthermore, Lyddon testified that he was never contacted about joining Williams's dissertation committee and was never shown a copy of Williams's dissertation.

Williams testified that, despite her complaint to Harper and Wheeler, the sexual harassment continued. According to Williams, Stamper and another now former USM professor harassed her until 1992, when she remarried. Williams further testified that, during this time, she could not get advice that she sorely needed in order to proceed with her dissertation. She wrote McCraw, her new

dissertation chair, seven times between April 5, 1991, and November 29, 1994, and called him numerous times. As shown by the record, her written messages were pleasant, positive and deferential to the heavy demands which Dr. McCraw must have had with his classes, etc. They also clearly and courteously expressed her concern about needing guidance regarding her dissertation. Finally, on June 5, 1995, more than four years after he was appointed as chair, McCraw replied:

First of all, let me apologize for the unconscionable lateness of this letter. . . . I got distracted and I failed to reply. . . . I am sorry if I have caused you any inconvenience. . . . The consensus of those of us who would form your graduate committee here at USM (Dr. Anne Wallace, Dr. Ken Watson and myself) . . . is that this is not a viable project as it now stands. The particulars are spelled out in the accompanying letter from Dr. Wallace. . . . Our opinion is that **if you wish to pursue a doctorate in English at USM, this could best be done by working with us from the start** on a project which would be fully supported by contemporary criticism and critical methodologies. . . . (emphasis added.)

After reading McCraw's letter, Williams hired an attorney. On February 15, 1996, Williams, her attorney, Vice President of Academic Affairs Dr. David Huffman, and USM's attorney met to discuss Williams's claim. When she did not hear from the university for another five months, Williams filed suit on July 15, 1996.

Williams' description of this episode paints a disturbing picture of USM. That these and other misguided activities have surrounded USM for so long is more than troubling. Moreover, it is because of the way USM behaves that so many former and current USM employees have Kim Chaze's phone number programmed to speed dial.